



Study 01: The Prophets Pray

Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down.
Mountains would then quake at your presence.

ISAIAH 64: 1

If you have watched “It’s Wonderful Life” you may remember the scenes used to illustrate each study. If you would like to see a “refresher” of the movie scene, follow the link to our website.

SETTING THE SCENE

The movie has paged through the opening credits and fades to black, only to open again to the snow-covered sign "You Are Now in Bedford Falls." We then get a tour of the town—street corners, businesses, restaurants, homes—and we hear a chorus of voices.

All of them are each praying for a man named George Bailey, each in turn praying for their friend, son, brother, husband, father. "I love him. Dear Lord, watch over him tonight." The scene then fades into a starry sky, and the galaxies begin to speak to each

other. The stars are angels, and the story has begun....

It can be easy to overlook how uniquely *It's a Wonderful Life* begins. We begin, to use the theatrical term, in medias res, "in the middle of things," with the chorus of prayers for a person who is in some sort of crisis. We do not know yet who he is or why we should be paying for him. And then, after the dialogue of starry angels, the majority of the rest of the movie is one long, extended flashback, until we get back to the movie's present moment.



Advent works in the same way. It begins in the middle of things and in prayer. “Stir up your power, O Lord, and come.” This is what prophets do. pray to God—often on behalf of others, sometimes for themselves—in pleading, praise, and lament. This is what prophets do.



The first candle on the Advent wreath is often called the "prophet's candle." During this season of Advent, we hear many readings from the prophet Isaiah, perhaps the most famous of the Hebrew prophets. Read Isaiah 64:1-9. In this text, Isaiah prays to God. The prayer begins in invocation, inviting God to "come down" (vv. 1-2). How does the prophet describe this coming ?

1. Why would he ask God to "come down" in this way?

The plea for God's presence is both for the sake of communal restoration but also for personal reconciliation.

2. Seeing this passage as a whole, how would you track the way Isaiah describes God's presence? What images does he use? How does he describe how God acts in the world?

Different answers for different folks. But generally speaking notice how the passage progresses from the large and cosmic to the small and intimate.

3. This passage from Isaiah climaxes in a call to repentance (w. 6-9). When have you experienced God "hiding" his face from you? What was the result?

Personal reflection. Answers vary

4. What comfort can we take from Isaiah's beautiful image that "we are the clay" and God is "our potter" (v. 8)? How have you seen God molding and shaping your life?

Personal reflection. Answers vary

5. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, we see the disastrous results of life in Bedford Falls without George Bailey. In Isaiah 64, we see the even more disastrous results of life when God "hides" from us. But God never hides forever. Read Isaiah 40:1-11, another great Advent word from the prophets. In a sense, we can read Isaiah 40 as one way God answers the prayer to "come down." We might expect God to return in anger or vengeance. But how would you describe God's return here?

The book of Isaiah is sometimes called "the Fifth Gospel." This passage is just one of the many marvelous proclamations of good news that fill the Advent season.

Where in your life right now do you need to hear this word of comfort?

Personal reflection. Answers vary

6. List the promises God makes in this passage. Which of these promises speak directly to your life right now?

God's promises to act, to rescue to save and restore fill Scripture. The power of God's promises is that the power of His word makes it happen. This gives encouragement and hope.

7. Christians see in Isaiah 40:3 the foretelling of another prophet who would come much later. Read Luke 1:5-25 and 1:57-66. This is the story of the birth of John the Baptist. What details strike you about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the way John the Baptist was born?

Their old age. Elizabeth's barrenness (which echoes matriarchs like Sarah, Rachel and Hannah). Zechariah's silence. The way John was named. etc

8. Imagine what it would be like to not be able to speak for nine months. What is the value of silence? How is it also like a prayer?

Prayer isn't just about our speaking to God. The silence in our praying opens up the possibility for reflection on what we are saying. Then we need to listen to God talking back to us through His holy Word.

9. In first-century Jewish culture, Elizabeth's barrenness would have been seen as a sign of disfavor or disgrace. Can you describe a time in your life when you or someone you love might have experienced the same sense of relief and joy when God "looked favorably" upon that situation?

Personal reflection. Answers vary

10. The hope of *It's a Wonderful Life* lies in how we are able to see the past of George's life (and our own lives) in a new way. Luke 1:66, though, expresses a hope that lies in how we can now view the future in light of God's promise: "What then will this child become?" We can read what became of John the Baptist. What is your hope today for who you might become in light of God's promise? (Perhaps reference the list of promises above as you answer.)

The season of Advent is a time to focus on the "already-not yet" tension of the Christian life. We have witnessed God at work in the past and hear His promise for the future. This makes it a time for hope.

PSALM 5:1-8

Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning.

Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.

O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.

The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

CLOSING PRAYER

We pray to you, dear Lord, that you would watch over each one of us as we await the arrival of your Son Jesus, to our towns and into our hearts. Let his presence be a welcome blessing to us all, and may we grow to love him more and more as we live our lives and work for him to his glory. Amen.